

[Cliff Webb and Billie Day]

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NEW YORK 10 Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A Circumstances of Interview

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Frank Byrd

ADDRESS 224 W. 135th St., N.Y.C.

DATE January 19, 1939

SUBJECT Harlem Personalities - Cliff Webb and Billie Day

1. Date and time of interview
2. Place of interview
3. Name and address of informant By staff writer, Frank Byrd.
4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant.
5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you
6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

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NEW YORK

FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

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DATE January 19, 1939

SUBJECT Harlem Personalities - Cliff Webb and Billie Day HARLEM PERSONALITIES

In the Charles Dillingham production of "New Faces" last season, that played to admiring, capacity audiences for many months, were two faces that were once well known in the vicinity of the Park Avenue Market in Harlem. They were the faces of Cliff Webb and Billie Day who at one time provided almost all the after-dark entertainment for the peddlers in the Latin Quarter.

In a little basement cabaret in East 111th Street, they gathered nightly to hear these two croon their plaintive Negro, West Indian and Spanish songs to the accompaniment of an out-of-tune piano and a battered but tuneful guitar. Cliff played the piano and Billie accompanied her own singing with the guitar obligatos. Occasionally there was dancing. Then these two vivacious kids acted as chorus and orchestra for the pleasure-seeking peddlers. The fact that they were able to earn a living solely on the tips they received was a tribute to their popularity. They never received a definite salary. In fact, it was very peculiar how they even happened to get the job.

The two kids had a habit of wandering from one little restaurant or cabaret to another, singing their songs, dancing (if asked) and passing the hat (if the proprietor had no objections) and filing out as quietly as they had appeared. One night they went to the Casa

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Diablo, the small basement place in 111th Street, and were such a huge success with the peddlers and other transient guests that the owner of the place, a Puerto Rican whom everyone called El Gato, asked them to come in every night and sing for tips. The only incentive offered them was all they wanted to eat and drink. They stayed.

Not long afterwards, the place became quite popular and one night some friends of Leonard Stillman, the director, stumbled accidentally into the place. They listened to the two rollicking youngsters and tipped Stillman off to their whereabouts. He engaged them for his show and they were an immediate success. The very first night they “stopped” the show; were forced to take curtain after curtain call. The blasé first nighters were simply mad about them. They were so new, so fresh and unspoiled.

El Gato's place remained the favorite retreat for the market peddlers but the atmosphere was never the same after Cliff and Billie left. Night after night, the peddlers used to sit around talking about the good times they had when these two kids were about and how different it was without them.